

Writer's Notebooks

Anderson, J. (2005). *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer's Workshop*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, pp. 27-42.

Writer's Notebook as a Playground

Jeff compares the writer's notebook to a playground—a safe place in which students “can have recess on the page, the sweet freedom to romp with thoughts, cavort with commas, and monkey around with syntax. It is the repository, organizer, placeholder, idea catcher, canvas to experiment and create, place to be wrong boldly” (p.29).

Everything in the notebook is in process all of the time. It might be called a “rewriter's notebook.”

Students use the notebook to...

- mine and refine entries
- reread and rewrite
- record their progress throughout the year
- create and play with language
- apply new craft techniques
- reread for a targeted edit (grammar/usage mini-lesson)

Setting up a Writer's Notebook

Drawing from the work of Vicki Spandel (2003), Anderson uses the writer's notebook as a tool to help students become “sentence stalkers” (p.29).

Steps for setting up the writer's notebook (p.30).

1. Never tear out a page of your notebook. Never. I tell my students, “If you think you must tear out a sheet, see me.”
2. Leave a fly page up front, just like in books.
3. Number the pages only on the right-handed side, starting after the fly page
4. Write the page number on the bottom right-hand side. This takes time, but it is a must. Think of the time saved later when a student can put a sticky note on the cover: *Read entry on pages 31-32.*
5. Only write on the right-hand pages of the notebook. Keep the left-hand pages bland for revising, rethinking, and tinkering with the facing numbered page. This saves space for the experimenting we will do with craft and mechanics in the notebook.

Sections:

- **Writing**—the largest section of the notebook—freewrite, respond, prewrite, create, shape, take notes, glue materials, and play with their writing. All entries are dated. He embeds mechanics instruction in the notebook freewrites.
- **The Writer's Eye**—students write about the life they've observed with their own eyes, writer's eyes. Students start a collection of the people, places, games, hobbies, interests they know well. Anderson connects craft/mechanics through these entries.
- **Author's Word and Phrase Palette**—Adapted from Noden (1999), this section is a collection of words or phrases that strike the student for a variety of reasons.
- **Gems: Sentences and Paragraphs that Work**—Gems are always full sentences, strings of sentences, or paragraphs. They make the reader pause with wonder. To make sentence patterns more explicit, correct examples are given in a mini-lesson format and these pages are glued into the writer's notebook.

Additional Tips:

- Notebooks stay in the classroom
- Store in colored crates
- If a big mistake happens in the notebook, glue a sheet that has been cut to fit, over the mistake

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Bomer, R. (1995). *Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle & High School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Randy recommends using notebooks as a way to show students how they can use writing to think.

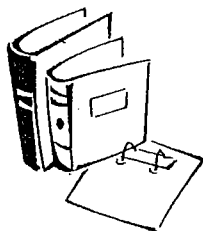
Getting Started:

- Memory Writing: Tell a story orally to your class. Then ask them to begin to tell stories to each other in small groups, allowing one person's story to remind another person of a story. After spending some time telling stories orally, ask students to write down some of the stories they've thought of in their writer's notebooks.
- Freewriting: Model this kind of writing for students on the board or overhead, showing them how you just write whatever is in your mind for a specified amount of time. After the first one, ask students to share their thoughts about what they saw happening as they wrote.
- Observations: Start by observing an object, any object and write a long time about that object. You might have students choose an object in the room, or you could take them on a walk outside. They could read their descriptions without naming the object and try to guess what others are describing.
- Layered Writing: Have students reread their entries and make notes in the margins or on the facing page about other ideas that come to mind. They will need room around their entries to do this kind of writing and thinking.
- Writing Outside of Class: You might have students complete a certain number of pages or entries each week for homework, in an attempt to have them see their notebooks as a way of recording their worlds outside of school. This kind of writing helps them and you "see patterns in their day-to-day thinking" (56).
- Responding to Reading: Having students respond to their reading in their writer's notebooks helps them see the connections between their reading and writing lives. Students use pieces of literature as "points of departure for thinking" (56).
- Other ideas (from Figure 3-1, p. 54): reflections—self-definition, wonderings—questions, speculation about meaning of events, snippets of language, clippings, pictures, images that stick in the mind, lists, experiments with really long and really short sentences, ideas for stories—kernels, family stories, dreams, descriptions, experiments with genre or style, revision of thinking, information, quotations, interviews, sensory impressions, copied text, caught poetry and found poetry, decision making, overheard conversations, imagined dialogue, conversing with oneself, plans, celebration of victories, reflections of writing pieces, personal descriptions/profiles, writing again about something from an old entry

Other Considerations:

- Conferences about Notebooks: During conferences, teachers can learn what the writer understands about writing in a notebook, and also find out what is the writer's "current apprehension (or misapprehension) of notebooks, writing to think, and purposes of writing" (59).
- Whole Class or Small Group Conversations about Notebooks: In these conversations, students might discuss questions such as (1) "Did anyone try a new type of notebook entry today?" (2) "Choose a sentence you think you wrote well and read it aloud. Then tell why you think it's good writing." (3) Leander Rewrites Overview
- "How did you get started today, and how does that strategy differ from what you have done before?" (4) "Did anyone have a hard time keeping on writing today? What did you do about it?" (5) "What kinds of words appear in your writing when you start moving from 'this happened' reporting into more reflective thinking?" (59-60).

Evaluating Notebooks: What criteria can be used for evaluation? (1) Volume: The notebook needs "a bunch of entries, at least a long one or several short ones for each class, plus five (two of which had to be longer) for homework" (60). (2) Variety: "The best notebooks [have] different entries about lots of different topics and also in lots of different 'notebook genres' (61). (3) Thoughtfulness. Randy "set up a class rotation...collecting every kid's notebook once every two weeks" (61). He then used a post-it note to record a grade and maybe a one or two word comment. He used conferences for his response.



What's In? What's Out?

In the Notebook

Daily Entries—strategies for launching the notebook

Finding Patterns—rereading and marking patterns in writing

Collecting Around a Topic—strategies for thinking about a topic

Revision Strategies—trying different things for a draft

Editing, Grammar Notes—class notes on grammar and editing skills

Out of the Notebook

DRAFTS

...[are] written out on yellow legal-pad paper.

REVISIONS

...are added or deleted from the piece.

EDITING

...is done right on the draft.

FINAL COPY

...[is] done on white paper or another published format.

Notebook Expectations

Students are expected to...



- write daily in their notebooks at school and at home three times a week (minimum).
- “find” topics for their notebook writing from their life, from reading, and from natural curiosity. Students are expected to make decisions about their writing topics on a daily basis.
- try strategies from the mini-lesson before continuing with their own work for the day.
- Fold over any entry they deem to personal to share with the teacher. (Students may not staple, glue, or tape this page shut.) Any folded-over entries the teacher cannot read will not be considered an entry toward their required number per week.
- Respect the integrity of the notebook by taking care of it and having it in class every day. Students will respect other notebooks by only reading entries they are invited to read by the author.
- Practice what they know about conventional spelling and grammar. Entries must be legible.
- Discover how writing can enrich their lives.



Writer's Notebooks

Calkins, L. (1991). *Living Between the Lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, pp. 35-52.

We can't give children rich lives, but we can give them the lens to appreciate the richness that is already there in their lives. Notebooks validate a child's existence. Notebooks say, 'Your thoughts, your noticings...matter' (p. 35).

The Notebook:

- Buy one for yourself—carry it with you, read with the notebook beside you, listen to the news, teach, travel, and eat with your notebook next to you.
- Find one that fits—each writer brings their own
- They are a concrete invitation to write without thinking of these as rough drafts
- An invitation to generate entries, notes, lists, drafts, observations, ramblings on millions of topics and on no particular topic at all.
- Collecting bits of their lives. Collecting bits of language—read, seen, or overheard that have the potential to spark new ways of thinking and writing
- Share examples from other children's notebooks
- The notebook provides seeds for longer drafts by reading and rereading the notebook looking for entries, sentences, or themes that matter to the writer
- Move out of the notebook to write drafts—yellow legal pad
- The draft can become the source for several pieces of writing in a variety of genres
- For notebooks to truly represent the lived experiences of the writer, they must leave the classroom.
- When notebooks are new, the workshop may begin with a mini-lesson that describes the different ways that writers use their notebooks—relaying personal stories of published authors.
- In a mini-lessons or writing conference, share with the class about the ways in which you or other authors described a scene, excerpted lines from a story, interviewed an authority, listed questions, returned to an earlier entry. Teach the students how to paste clippings, copy quotations into their notebooks, use their notebooks for research.
- Use the notebook as a place to respond to reading. Some teachers choose to keep these separate; however, if they do, it will be important for the children to record some of what they noticed in their writer's notebook.

"I compost my life," Murray says in describing "the great garage sale of junk" from which his notebook—and eventually, his writing—is made, "piling up phrases which do not yet make sense, lines overheard in a restaurant, scenes caught in the corner of my eyes, pages not yet understood, questions not yet shaped, thoughts half begun, problems unsolved, answers without questions" (1989, p.242 as cited in Calkins, 1991, p.44).

Writer's Notebooks

Fletcher, R. (1996). *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You*. New York: Harper Trophy.

"A writer's notebook is like [a] ditch—an empty space you dig in your busy life, a space that will fill up with all sorts of fascinating little creatures. If you dig it, they will come. You'll be amazed by what you catch there" (2).

A writer's notebook "gives you a place to write down what makes you angry or sad or amazed, to write down what you noticed and don't want to forget, to record exactly what your grandmother whispered in your ear before she said good-bye for the last time" (4).

"A writer's notebook gives you a place to live like a writer, not just in school during writing time, but wherever you are, at any time of day" (4).

Things to Collect: unforgettable stories, fierce wonderings, details (writing small), seed ideas (ideas that you can go back to, add to, change, combine, etc.), mind pictures, snatches of talk, lists, memories, writing that scrapes the heart (personal journal type writing), collecting important relics from your life, collecting others' writing

Fletcher, R. (1996). *Breathing In Breathing Out: Keeping a Writer's Notebook*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

"Keeping a notebook is the single best way I know to survive as a writer. It encourages you to pay attention to your world, inside and out. It serves as a container to keep together all the seeds you gather until you're ready to plant them. It gives you a quiet place to catch your breath and begin to write" (1).

"The book's title illuminates two basic aspects of the writer's notebook. *Breathing In* refers to the way the notebook serves as a container for selected insights, lines, images, ideas, dreams, and fragments of talk gathered from the world around you. In this way it gets you into the habit of paying closer attention to your world. *Breathing Out* suggests that the notebook is a fine place from which to take what you have collected and use it to spark your own original writing" (2).

"Regular notebook writing acts as a wakeup call, a daily reminder to keep all your senses alert. This starts a cycle that reinforces itself. Writing down small details gets you in the habit of seeking out the important small things in your world. These details in turn often lead you to new material you never knew you had" (19).

Collecting: odd facts, questions, odds and ends, lists (favorite words, names of islands, titles, etc.), lines and insights, descriptions/sketches of the physical world, talk (slang, colorful language, a spoken slice of life), memories, words of other writers

Generating: allowing yourself to write badly ["Your ability to get the most out of your notebook depends on your ability to accept failure, tons of it" (56)], composting ["Like a compost heap, a writer's notebook is all about change, commonplace ingredients simmering in a slow hot stew until they get transformed into something new and valuable... Compost heaps and notebooks share a fertility that is ongoing and mysterious... Like a compost heap, a writer's notebook typically does not have separate compartments for particular kinds of entries... The compost heap requires the patience to wait... The writer's notebook often requires something similar..." (59)], transforming, rereading (deliberately for ideas, skimming to get into mood to write, looking for a voice, looking for a particular theme), cross-pollination ["connecting two disparate forms or ideas and seeing what might result" (72)], collecting on a particular topic or idea, layering ["going over the same material, digging deeper, looking for surprises (75)], inventing, exercising (trying things out), writing about writing